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ABSTRACT

Difficulties of Puerto Rican children in adjusting to school in the U.S. mainland can be attributed to their family background and early schooling experience. Unlike the isolated, independent nuclear family unit usually found on the mainland, Puerto Rican families are extended and prize cooperation, socialization, respect for the male patriarch, fatalism, submission, passivity, and interdependence. Thus, Puerto Rican children are unused to an atmosphere of individual competitiveness, and are thought to be lazy and unmotivated. Furthermore, they are more used to verbal than written communication, and tend to resist the authority of female teachers. In Puerto Rico, schools also serve as a social center; thus, academic skills of students tend to be weaker than those of the mainland children--a problem compounded by language difficulties. Puerto Rican parents do not fully understand the role of mainland schools, and frequently keep their English-speaking children out of school to help them with personal matters. They are also very modest, and disapprove of sex education and physical education for girls. Economic disadvantages mean that few educational materials are available at home. The resulting cultural conflicts can be alleviated by such steps as encouraging greater parent participation in the schools, a bilingual school environment, and peer tutoring. (CJM)

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# Working Papers

on

# Issues in Puerto Rican Education

THE CONFLICTS IN BILINGUAL,
CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS OF THE PUERTO RICAN
MIGRANT CHILDREN ON THE MAINLAND

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# THE CONFLICTS IN IN-SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIORS OF THE PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT CHILDREN ON THE MAINLAND*

JOSEPH O. PREWITT DIAZ*

*Introduction*

The Puerto Rican migrant is in every sense of the word disadvantaged. These American citizens are characterized by limited education, high unemployment, poor housing, and a vulnerability to psychological handicaps. The dropout rate of the Puerto Rican students on the Mainland is 89 percent in spite of bilingual education programs (Betances, 1979). Some have indicated that there is a direct link between these social problems and success in school, but the author argues that this relationship must be understood within the context of culture.

This paper, then, offers a historical perspective of Puerto Ricans, reviews associations between in-school cultural behavior on the Mainland and the conflict on the migrant Puerto Rican children in school cultural behavior, and lastly, provides suggestions on the classroom teacher and administration for delivering a more effectual instructional program to these students.

*Historical Perspective*

Puerto Rico was discovered in 1492 by Christopher Columbus and colonized by Spain in 1508. The Spaniards converted the Island into a penal colony and a wayside for ships. In the centuries that followed, because of its strategic location in the Caribbean, the Island became a Spanish fortress. This fortress was attacked by the English, Dutch and the French. In 1898 it became a part of the United States as a result of the Spanish American War. In 1917 the United States gave American citizenship to the people of Puerto Rico.

Although Puerto Ricans have been migrating to the Mainland since the turn of the century, it was not until the mid fifties that migration increased. The Puerto Rican population on the Mainland has increased from 301,375 in 1950 to 1,823,000 in 1978, (Ahearn, 1979). This

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population is concentrated in the Northeast and the Midwest of the United States.

By 1970 some 34 percent of all Puerto Ricans (in the United States and in the Island) were residing on the Mainland (U. S. Commission of Civil Rights, 1976, pp. 25-28). Puerto Ricans, as U. S. citizens, do not need a passport to travel to the Mainland, and this has facilitated a continuous shuffling back and forth between the Island and the Mainland as many seek better economic opportunities. This constant movement had serious repercussion on most of the large cities in the Eastern United States (Brisk, 1978; Teitelbaum and Heller, 1977; Zirkel, 1977).

*In-School Cultural Behavior and Conflicts in the Mainland*

Many studies (Eiseman, 1973; Fitzpatrick, 1971; Lewis, 1966; and Padilla, 1958) address the needs of the Puerto Ricans who migrated to the Mainland. Other studies (Badillo Ghali, 1977; Montalvo, 1974) explain the difficulties which the children encounter in making the transition from an island cultural pattern to the in-school cultural behavior expected of them in Mainland schools. It seems that the migrations, from the Mainland to the Island, and back to the Mainland has had serious repercussion on the personality of the Puerto Rican child (Kavestky, 1978; Ramos Pérez, 1978).

Migration as an isolated event does not change the cultural behaviors of the Puerto Rican child. Some researchers in the New York area (González and Luckett, 1960; Mizio, 1974; Pintado, Rahn, and González, 1968; and Vázquez de Rodrigues, 1971) and in New England (Leach, 1971; Martínez, 1972; Prewitt Díaz, 1978a) have studied the native and cultural patterns of the Puerto Rican family. They seem to concur that the Puerto Rican family is, in contrast to the American, an extended family; where intimate relationships with the kinship system are of high value and a source of pride and security (Mizio, 1974). The sociolegal system on the Mainland addresses itself to the nuclear family.

The conflicts which arise in in-school cultural behavior on the Mainland are often the result of an adjusting family structure, from an extended family pattern to a nuclear family pattern. On the Mainland the support systems are no longer found within the family, but have to be sought out of the family when needed. When the Puerto Rican migrant children need to modify their behaviors to adjust to the school environment on the Mainland, the teacher might expect some conflicts to arise. This paper will try to clarify some in-school cultural behavior patterns which might create a conflict for a Puerto Rican migrant child. (See Figure 1.)

The adjustment problem which the migrant child faces is quite complex. On the one hand the ignorance of the intolerance of the school system (Montalvo, 1974) enhances a negative feeling toward school. The constant failure in expressing their cultural values has and an inhibiting effect on the Puerto Rican migrant children, (Sister Thomas Marie, 1979). These conflicts have had the tendency of blocking the road to success, the children lose their willingness to achieve and as a result their fear of failure increases. The children become oblivious of the more progressive educational currents, and are unable to preserve or enjoy the educational process.

The intellectual capacity of the Puerto Rican migrant students has been impaired by their inability to adapt to classroom cultural behaviors in the Mainland. As a result, many students are placed in the lower academic tracks and the older students are referred to the vocational areas. The argument has been that the student lacks the necessary skills to survive in higher education (Vásquez de Rodríguez, 1971).

If the teachers have high expectations of what the student is able to achieve, then the student will live up to those expectations. This expectation might be hampered by the frequent changes of school for the student, the readaptation to a new parish or church, and the efforts involved in making new contacts.

The interaction of the child with the adults in the household provides the first source of language development and cultural identity. These experiences are modified as the child enters the school on the Mainland. In effect the Puerto Rican migrant children are placed in a position where they must decide between two cultures and between two languages (Bram, 1966; Montalvo, 1974). It is at this point in which home culture and in-school cultural behavior conflict. The paragraphs that follow will discuss the in-school cultural behavior in the Island and the Mainland and the resultant conflicts will be further analyzed.

*Puerto Rican/Mainland In School Cultural Behavior Conflicts*

In the schools on the Mainland, the teachers' expectation is that the child look at the teacher when he/she is spoken to or reprimanded, and to provide an answer. In the Puerto Rican family, children are expected to obey implicity the head of the house. So, when the child is being disciplined, he/she must not look at his/her father or mother's face or answer any questions. Otherwise, they would be considered, *un malcriado* (badly brought up), and the act of talking back to an adult would be considered, *una falta de respeto*, (a lack of respect). As a

resulting conflict the children would be confused as to the appropriate behavior while being reprimanded.

On the Mainland the schools foster competition among students both by using competition as an incentive and by requiring that individual work be a norm in the classroom. The Puerto Rican family tend to be quite large. They easily make room in their crowded home for children from relatives, often called *hijos de crianza*, (children of upbringing). Socialization and cooperation in the home is fostered and older children are assigned the task of caring for younger brothers and sisters (Brau, 1966; Mizio, 1974). In school the Puerto Rican children probably find themselves lost without knowing how to behave. The teacher might consider the child as lazy and might consider the child as unruly and inclined to cheat (Vásquez de Rodríguez, 1971). This is followed by low teacher expectations for a Puerto Rican student's success in school.

In the school the child is taught that success depends on effort; the emphasis is on upward mobility; the student is encouraged to perform academically with the rest of the group. One of the Puerto Rican's greatest fear in the Mainland is that of relinguishing his/her individuality to conform to the group. They tend to be fatalistic about their destiny, and often respond to crisis with comments like, "Que sea lo que Dios quiera" or "Ay bendito": the first, accepting God's will and the second bemoaning their fate, (Badillo Ghali, 1977; Fitzpatrick, 1966; Wagenheim, 1975). Submissiveness and passivity are encouraged as the ultimate in civilized behavior (Badillo Ghali, 1977). To the teacher the behavior of the Puerto Rican migrant children might seem as a lack of enthusiasm and self-confidence (Prewitt Díaz, 1978a).

The school on the Mainland reinforces competition among peers. The Puerto Rican extended family, in contrast with the nuclear family which is predominant in the United States, is a closely knit institution. Intimate relationships with the kinship system are of high value and a source of pride and security. Relationships are intense and frequent, even if the persons are not living in the same household, (Mizio, 1974). There are important mutual obligations and strict controls (Badillo Ghali, 1977). The elderly are respected, and the young ones loved, (Ahearn, 1979). A conflict might arise in the Mainland classroom because the Puerto Rican children may lack the ability to compete with peers and might be thought to be anti-social and dull.

Frequently, the authority figure in the classroom is a woman. The Puerto Rican family is patriarchal in nature (Montalvo, 1974). The man is strongly dependent on his wife's and children's differential attitudes for his ego gratification, (Fernández Marina, 1968). The wife does not

begrudge her husband this privilege since indirectly it enhances her own standing as well. In fact, she may even tend to exaggerate his dictatorial masculinity and portrays herself as a victim in the hands of a strong, virile tyrant (Bram, 1966). As a result, the Puerto Rican child questions the authority of the female teacher in the classroom and tends to test her.

On the Mainland children are segregated by age groups and often times go to different schools. Scholars who have studied the Puerto Rican family (Fernández Méndez, 1970; Steward, 1956; Tumin and Feldman, 1971) observe that older children are not only assigned the task of caring for younger ones; it has ordinarily been taken for granted that the oldest child is next in authority with almost the same right as his parents. In Puerto Rican society, great importance is attached to the family (Mixio, 1974). Kinship bonds are strong, and the family tends to function as a unit. The conflict arises because the Puerto Rican child functions best in a group situation, whereas most classrooms call for individual accomplishment.

In the Mainland schools, the students are asked to be dependent on the teacher's direction. The teacher is the disciplinarian. The high degree of emotialism of the Puerto Rican is the cause of enforcing discipline on a child by means of: (1) threats, *Te voy a meter una galleta que te va a coger fuego el pelo*, (I am going to slap you so hard that your hair will be set on fire); (2) fear, *Pórtate bien que ahí viene el cuco*, (Behave yourself because the buggyman will get you); (3) mysticism, *Si no te comes la comida, la Virgen llora*, (If you do not eat your food the Virgin will cry). The difference between the way the child is disciplined at home and at school create a situation whereby the child does not respect the substitute disciplinarian.

The schools in the Mainland usually have better facilities than the schools in Puerto Rico. The approach to educating the child is client-centered, and the child is expected to have acquired the motor skills at home and to show facility with materials, games, toys, books, crayons, etc. Padilla, (1958) and Prewitt Díaz, (1978a), have documented the fact that the Puerto Rican family on the Mainland is very large and that often times the apartments are crowded and noisy. Badillo Ghali (1977) indicates, that the Puerto Rican family often lacks the financial resources to maintain their families. Newman (1978) points out that 84.8 percent of the Puerto Ricans in the work force are employed as operatives on laborer jobs. The Puerto Rican children often lack educational materials and play-things in the home, (Montalvo, 1974) and most of the child's play is imitative of the adults in the household (Prewitt Díaz, 1978b). The children often display agressive behavior when interacting with their

peers. In the primary grades the Puerto Rican child is considered as lacking the necessary home experiences for conceptual development.

In the Mainland physical education is taught as a subject in school and it is a graduation requirement. Prewitt Díaz (1978a) suggests that one of the problems in getting the Puerto Rican students involved in sports, physical education, and health classes was the fact that they refused to undress in front of other students. The Puerto Rican students, particularly the girls, are modest. They have been taught not to undress in front of others. The migrant Puerto Rican children may show embarrassment during physical education and react against participation.

On the Mainland education is considered a priority for all children. Strict laws rule children attendance to school. In Puerto Rico the school, to a large extent, plays the role of the Settlement House. In the *barrios* (neighborhoods) the school is the place for socialization, meetings, and activities of a civic nature. Education in Puerto Rico is subordinate to family duties. If the parent needs the child to stay home and take care of the younger brothers and sisters, or the adolescent accompanies the parent to a government office or hospital the school would accept that as a valid excuse. The school system on the Mainland is very complicated for the newly-arrived. The Puerto Rican parents are unable to relate adequately to the school system and often do not understand the regulations regarding attendance to school.

The relation between the home and the school deteriorates because of the deficiency in English of the parent and what seems the failure of the school to understand the home situation. The children status in the family is enhanced as soon as they learn conversational English. The English-speaking children will now be the interpreter for their father and mother (Prewitt Díaz, 1978a). The child becomes a linking factor for his family with the institutions of the larger society (Padilla, 1958). The children may have to miss classes to accompany the parents to hospitals and other institutions, and any errand which requires the services of an interpreter. The school considers the Puerto Rican child irresponsible for missing school days. The parent, fearful of the idea that the child might be considered a delinquent by the school, becomes hostile and apathetic.

The Mainland school has assumed the responsibility for sex education. The Puerto Rican parents feel that young girls should not be exposed to sex education (Ortiz, 1970). The conflict rises when the parents advise their daughters not to participate in health classes where sex education takes place.

The Mainland school places demand on the students for written information and expressions. The level of schooling of the adults is sixth grade (Newman, 1978), therefore, the communication between family members is verbal rather than written. The Puerto Rican students tend to appear as if they had no ideas and suggestions when asked to write them down (Pennsylvania Education, 1971).

The migrant Puerto Rican child is expected to achieve for self-satisfaction. Very early in life the child is motivated to achieve for the family (Padilla 1958, 112-147). Often times the student's behavior while performing a task is misinterpreted as apathy (Sister Thomas Marie, 1969).

It is assumed that the migrant children who are placed in the third grade or higher has acquired lower level skills in previous grades. The migrant Puerto Rican often comes to the Mainland from rural areas (Lewis, 1966; Padilla, 1958; Sandis, 1970). This lack of basic skills has been interpreted by some as a natural inability to deal with abstractions (Betances, 1979).

Most of the communication and information sent to the home is in English. The parents of the migrant children received their education in another country, Puerto Rico, and in another language, Spanish. The parents as a result often times do not understand the efforts of the school to educate their children. The children are used to looking to their parents for help and protection. Now the children find that their parents are uninformed and insecure concerning matters of school.

## Conclusion

Many other changes have taken place in the Puerto Rican family life in the new social environment. In the Island they lived under what sociologists call "primary social controls," i.e. in small communities where neighbors, relatives, school, teachers, and all others exercised a restraining influence on individual behavior. The anonymity of life in the Mainland makes them feel uncomfortably free, "on their own," and also fearfull of how this might affect loved ones (wife, daughter, sons, etc.) whose behavior they would like to supervise.

To try to describe and understand the Puerto Rican family of today is not easy. The Island society is undergoing numerous changes briefly identifiable by such terms as urbanization, industrialization, welfare economy, growing life span, increasing population, etc. (Wagenheim, 1975). When individual Puerto Rican family fly over to the Mainland and attempt an adjustment to the new socioeconomic world of the United

States, they find themselves subjected to numerous additional pressures. Neither back home in Puerto Rico, nor here on the Mainland can their existence be described as stable and secure. In order to understand any specific Puerto Rican family group, one has to "locate" the family on the total map of social change which the Puerto Rican society is undergoing at this time.

*Application*

The following suggestions might help alleviate the conflict between the in-school in cultural behavior in the Island and in-school cultural behavior on the Mainland of Puerto Rican migrant children.

1. Parents should be informed of the children's schedule, classes, and school activities in the parents' native language.
2. The teachers should meet the parents personally. In this initial contact the teacher should reassure the parent that the child will be well treated in the classroom.
3. The school administration should allow the parents to visit the school and their child's classroom. It is important that the school provide a community room where parents can meet to plan festive occasions, activities for the classroom, and newsletters. They should be allowed to serve as chaperones in field trips, dances, movies, and games. The school should inform the parent of positive and poor behavior. Finally, any information that the school wants to convey to the parents should be in the parent's native language.
4. The teacher should formulate an environment where individual expression is encouraged in Spanish or English. The children should be encouraged to participate in games and activities until the child feels secure in the new environment and can interact freely in the classroom. The children should be allowed to express themselves through music, art, and movement. If the teachers are aware that the child is participating in community activities they should be supportive and encouraging.
5. While the teacher reassures the children that the parents are always in "control," when exerting authority in the classroom the teacher should be assertive.
6. The classes can be divided into smaller groups (families) in some of the instructional activities.

7. The teacher should invite the parents to attend physical education and health classes, so that they get first hand exposure to this part of the curriculum.

8. The teacher should initiate a peer-tutoring program so that new arrivals might be helped to grasp the basic skills in arithmetic and reading.

9. When absent the child should be given the opportunity to explain the reason for his/her absences. The administrator should contact the parent and explain school rules. The child should not be penalized.

10. The teacher and school personnel should make themselves visible in the community.

**Figure 1**

## PUERTO RICAN/MAINLAND IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR CONFLICTS

| IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR ON THE ISLAND | IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR ON THE MAINLAND | CONFLICT IN THE PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT CHILD'S IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR |
|---|---|---|
| Puerto Rican socialization in the home fosters cooperation among children, rather than competition. | Schools foster competition among students, both by using it as an incentive and by requiring that individual work be a course in the classroom. | Puerto Rican students are considered lazy by the teachers; also they are thought to be unruly and/or inclined to cheat. This is followed by low teacher expectations for a Puerto Rican student's success in school. |
| Accepts as a fact that he/she exists subject to God's will. | Upward mobility. Success depends on effort. | The student is seen to lack enthusiasm and self-confidence. |
| Large, closely-knit family, strong ties and loyalties. | Competition among peers. | The student may lack ability to compete with peers and is thought to be anti-social and dull. |
| Mother primarily to perform household duties. A love symbol. Is submissive to the father. | Frequently the authority figure in the classroom is a woman. | The Puerto Rican child questions the authority of the female teacher in the classroom and tends to test her. |

(Continuation)

| IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR ON THE ISLAND | IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR ON THE MAINLAND | CONFLICT IN THE PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT CHILD'S IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR |
|---|---|---|
| Children often come from rural areas. If they are placed in the third grade or higher, they have not had the education comparable to that of the other children. | Teacher assumes that the lower level abilities have been acquired in previous grades. | Children do not have the basic skills in reading and arithmetic that the teacher assumes that they should have. This lack of education is often interpreted as a natural inability to deal with abstractions. |
| Education is subordinate to family duties. Considered more important to the male, for learning a skill. | Education considered as a priority for all children. Considered natural for a girl to be educated, just as a boy. | The Puerto Rican child considered irresponsible for missing many school days. Might be apathetic in school. Not much relationship between the home and the school on the part of the parents who are embarrassed by deficiency in English. |
| When being disciplined, the Puerto Rican child must not look up or answer an, question. Otherwise he is considered impudent. | "Look at me! Answer when you are spoken to . . .!" | The student is confused as to appropriate behavior while being reprimanded. |
| Motivated to achieve for the family. | Motivated to achieve for self-satisfaction. | The Puerto Rican student's behavior during tasks is misinterpreted as apathy. |
| Parents received education in another country, in another language, on the whole. | Much of the communication and information dispersal to the family is in English. | The child is use to looking to his/her parents for help and protection. Now he/she finds that they are uninformed and insecure concerning matters of the school. |

(Continuation)

| IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR ON THE ISLAND | IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR ON THE MAINLAND | CONFLICT IN THE PUERTO RICAN MIGRANT CHILD'S IN SCHOOL CULTURAL BEHAVIOR |
|---|---|---|
| Close sibling relationship. Older children responsible for younger. | Segregated age groups. | The Puerto Rican child functions best in a group situation, whereas most classroom will call for individual accomplishment. |
| Independent at an early age. Highly disciplined by the parents by means of threats, fear and mysticism. Sex education ignored. | The students are asked to be dependent on the teacher's directions. The teacher is the disciplinarian. Sex education is seen to be the responsibility of the school. | The Puerto Rican student does not respect the substitute disciplinarian. Puerto Rican parents do not feel that sex education is the function of the school. |
| Used to verbal, rather than written form of communication. | Places demands on the student for written information, expression, i.e., test, questionaries. | The Puerto Rican student tends to appear as if he/she has no ideas and suggestions when asked to write them down. Prefers the personal approach. |
| Home is crowded and noisy often lacking in educational materials and playthings. | Calls for facility with materials: games, etc. The teacher usually picks a quiet, controlled atmosphere. | The Puerto Rican student often display aggressive behavior. Lacks the necessary experiences for conceptual development. |
| Extremely modest. | Sometimes calls for physical display during physical examination. | The Puerto Rican may show embarrassment during physical education and react against participation. |

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